Naitō Konan and Naitō’s Historiography: A Reconsideration in the Early Twenty-First Century

In English the term “Japanese Sinology” might be translated into Chinese as either 日本漢學 or 日本的中國硏究, and it covers as much or even more than the Chinese expressions. It can mean Japanese studies of Chinese history and culture, or Japanese exegeses of the Chinese classics throughout the ages, or in fact any instance in which one examines Japanese approaches to or responses to Chinese civilization from antiquity through the present. My own work has tended to fall within the first category: Japanese studies of Chinese history, and it is to this general subject that I shall address my remarks today.

Some years ago, I spent a great deal of time studying the writings of the celebrated Japanese historian, Naitō Konan 内藤湖南, Torajirō 虎次郎 (1866–1934), and the school of Sinology he helped to build at Kyoto University early in the last century. What I soon learned—this is an obvious point—is that I could not simply read his many writings on Chinese history and culture and then write an analysis of them. Rather, I had to immerse myself in the period in which he wrote, roughly the 1880s through the years just prior to his death in the early 1930s—namely, mid-Meiji 明治 through early Shōwa 昭和 Japan. I also came to understand that I would have to read his writings on Japanese history, because the historical and cultural relationship between China and Japan were central to his entire project as a scholar.

The result was a book that I have never been entirely satisfied with: Politics and Sinology: The Case of Naitō Konan (1866–1934) which was translated into Japanese as: 《內藤湖南、ポリティックスとシノロジー》. Unsatisfied for two reasons. First, there were several areas of Chinese culture to which he had devoted considerable attention and which I was unable to find a way of addressing in the book. These would include Chinese art history and Chinese historiography; in both of these scholarly areas, he wrote eminent books and articles.

*本文初稿曾在2003年11月7、8日由台灣大學日文系主辦的「第二屆日本漢學國際學術硏討會」上宣讀，謹向主辦單位及學報兩位評審者致謝。
Second, in the 1970s and early 1980s, I was still writing in a defensive mode. With the exception of a handful of his most famous disciples—such as Miyazaki Ichisada 宮崎市定 (1901–1995) and Yoshikawa Kōjirō 吉川幸次郎 (1904–1980)—who continued to laud their professor, the influence of the war years was still strong when I was doing my work, and this meant that Naitō was still associated with all things Japanese in China and that meant aggression against China. If I wanted to say anything even remotely positive about his theories, I had to first try to overcome the negative image that had developed around much of the scholarship associated with him in postwar Japan.

The first postwar articles written about Naitō were highly condemnatory and found the roots of imperialism in every one of his famous theories. Thus, to give just one example, while Naitō may have argued that China entered modernity over a millennium ago at the start of the Song dynasty, that only meant in his harshest critics’ eyes that he thought China had stagnated in modernity for those many centuries. I knew this was all wildly exaggerated, but I had to argue from a defensive posture, all the time knowing equally well that there were, of course, political aspects about his life and career that were tainted with Japanese imperialism.

This situation has all now happily changed. I would like in my talk today to first address reasons why the mood has changed, look at some of the newer work on Naitō that has appeared in recent years, and then take a fresh close look at one of the two areas I was unable to address in my book twenty-five years ago, his work in the field of Chinese historiography.

What Has Changed

I think the most important thing that has changed since I first began reading and writing about Naitō Konan has been unrelated to changes within Japan. Interestingly, since the death of Mao Zedong and the commencement of the Four Modernizations, Mainland Chinese authors have rediscovered Naitō on their own, as have scholars in Taiwan over the past decade or more. I say “rediscovered” because Naitō had many Chinese colleagues and associates before his death, especially during his years at Kyoto University. A number of his essays were translated into Chinese, and his views were recognized—not necessarily always agreed with, but recognized—as sufficiently significant as to warrant their attention. In the prewar world of Sinological studies by serious scholars as opposed to, shall we say, more popular or journalistic writers such